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FLAUBERT AND SYMONDS: INTELLECTUAL AND HUMAN IDEALS IN LITERATURE.

Two noteworthy volumes appeared sometime ago which seemed to me to represent some phases of the literary art, as practiced in England and France, suggestive of some broad generalizations. It seemed that they might serve admirably as a text to fasten a moral or a sermon upon art and morality. This is a perennial topic for a certain class of essayists. It was the chance for Thomas Wentworth Higginson, always eager for a theme for dogmatizing; but he failed, unhappily, to avail himself. Hamlin Garland might have found here additional data for his thesis upon the decay of art, outside of Chicago—everywhere, indeed, save in the virile West!—but the opportunity was lost. It was an interesting coincidence that the two books should have appeared at the same time, and I cannot recall many years that volumes of such intense interest to literary students have come from the press. Each was the record of a singular personality striving for utmost attainment, content with nothing but the highest possible development, subjecting himself the while to the bitterest self-scrutiny. Each of them triumphed in his own particular way. Each, after long labor, succeeded in realizing a measure of happiness and success. Their lives are traced through autobiographies and letters by sympathetic biographers: one, the life and letters of Gustave Flaubert; the other, the life and autobiography of John Addington Symonds.

Flaubert was the Frenchman, called the first of the realists, the author of that much-praised, much-derided, but great novel, "Madam Bovary." Though the least of the realists, in fact, yet he was called the founder of the school, because those following him knew his method but not his inspiration. He is curiously interesting as the typical Frenchman, French of the French, who carried the worship of the visible, the expression of the same, to the very highest pitch. He was, of

all Frenchmen, the greatest stylist, a devotee to style. "He was," says Henry James, "the martyr to the plastic idea."

In the matter of style, of a peculiarly flexible and rhythmic style, the French easily excel all others. In order to express all the myriad phases of a meaning, they have brought the language to such a highly elastic medium that no other is comparable in range and charm for purely descriptive writing. There are many delicate shades which can be expressed only in the French. The earnest striving for the exact, precise, consummate expression is a characteristic of all French writers. An idea is worth nothing if it is not expressed with grace, with charm and adequacy. Flaubert represented this worship of form in an exaggerated degree. He preserved his singleness of purpose, but the record of his life is an enigma to us, who do not thoroughly realize that the French temperament is built upon layer after layer of artificiality, and it all seems like a great ado about nothing. He started out with the conscious purpose of writing a masterpiece. He spent seven years of arduous labor. It was a labor of love, but it was a self-inflicted torture besides. He spent days, weeks, months, fashioning a single phrase. He wrote and rewrote. He revised and corrected down to the smallest minutiae. When it was a matter involving information as to any point in science or what not, he was not content with anything but perfect accuracy. He read and annotated fifteen hundred volumes in order to write four hundred octavo pages. He says: "In four months I have written fourteen pages, and these bad ones." In writing to a friend he makes the curious confession: "I am driven wild by writing. Style, which is a thing that I take very much in earnest, agitates my nerves horribly. What a quaint mania to pass one's life wearing one's self out over words!" The beauty which he worshiped seemed mere verbal beauty. Yet the book, his first book ("Madam Bovary"), when it appeared, was hailed as the masterpiece which its author designed it should be. Judged as Flaubert would have it judged, it was certainly a great performance, and remains one of the unique contribu-

tions of French literature. It makes an impression at once poignant and overwhelming.

But the man, as revealed in his letters, is more interesting than his book. Such sacrifices for the sake of faultless execution, such self-immolation for the sake of style, are thoroughly French. Such a career is possible only in France. Yet Robert Louis Stevenson had Flaubert's high conception of the province of style. He followed Flaubert's method to a nicety, but the difference is very great; Stevenson was far more genuinely human.

Flaubert, in his letters, railed against the sudden vacuity of the masses. The object of his particular detestation was the great, stupid middle-class Frenchmen, the class which Matthew Arnold pointed to as worthy of such emulation for their intelligence! He was disdainful of any class except the literary class, and had no faith whatever in the people, for whom he declared he did not write. Here is a passage illustrating a jaunty self-sufficiency: "As for us, let us stay at home, let us watch the public pass from the height of our balcony; and if from time to time we are overbored, well, let us spit on their heads and then calmly continue our talk, and watch the sun setting in the west." He says further: "The mass, the number, is always idiotic. I have not many connections, but I hold to that strongly."

Flaubert lived for his friends, and beyond the circle he seemed to have no human interests. The longer he lived the louder he raved against the imbecility of the French public. He had no faith in humanity, nor in the future, nor in himself, and his latter days were greatly embittered. But his ardor for finish, his devotion to the beautiful phrase, never lessened. His mother said to him: "The mania for phrases has dried up your heart." His last book, "*Bonvard et Pécuchet*," was a revenge, as he called it, against the complacent middle class, the hatred of which nearly ran him mad. He says: "The inanity of mankind does actually so overwhelm me that I feel like a fly with the Himalayas on its back. Never mind. I will try to spew out my venom into my book. This hope comforts me."

He followed consistently his literary creed, which he expressed thus: "What seems fine to me, what I would like to write would be a book about nothing, a book without any external connection which would support itself of itself by the external force of its style. . . . There are neither good nor bad subjects. One might establish an axiom, looking from the point of view of pure art, to the effect that there is no subject, style being in itself an independent manner of seeing things. I should require a whole book to develop what I mean."

Symonds represents something quite different. The analogies, to start with, are striking; the contrasts are equally so at the close of their careers. Both had means and leisure and received a university training. Both studied law and found it distasteful. Flaubert said: "I can see nothing more stupid than jurisprudence, if it is not the study of jurisprudence; I work at it with profound disgust, and that deprives me of all heart and spirit for anything." Symonds wrote: "I find that law is not a subject which attracts me. Indeed, it is with difficulty that I can bring myself to study it at all." Both entered upon literature with misgivings. Symonds wrote to a friend: "I am in a state of suspense about law and literature. Am I to serve God or mammon? Am I to study and write, or to pursue this profession? Am I to be poor with letters, or run the chance of being rich with law? Then again, am I justified in assuming myself to be one of the priesthood of art? Am I a selected soul? If I give myself to literature and find myself inadequate, can I be content with a fastidious silence? . . . You see I am settling the question of life; and if you can give me any definite ideas on these vague problems, thanks to you. It is a terrible and a consuming problem." Finally he closes the letter, which seems to have been written in a mood of gloomy self-abasement: "It is a hard world, my dear Dakyus, but a beautiful world if one could feel one's self at liberty to enjoy it." Flaubert seems not to have been so concerned about a career, though he was profoundly miserable. Yet he gave himself with complete

abandon to the enjoyment of external nature and the charm of the great writers. Art was to him a fetich; he worshiped nothing else. From the record of the prolonged inward struggle and the "torment of style," it would seem that whatever contentment was secured was with enormous sacrifices.

Both were given to introspection and were singularly candid in self-expression. The record is ample and satisfactory. They have revealed everything of themselves to the world. Here the analogy ends. With like perplexities, misgivings, unfaith, with æsthetic perceptions very vivid, with a like native sense of exclusiveness, as the result of birth and breeding, the one started with a literary creed which narrowed life down to the art of writing, and narrowed his sympathies to a particular coterie; the other followed a broader purpose, a more human ideal, and resolved to live a full, free life, in touch with the world, "to live resolvedly in the whole, the good, the beautiful." Symonds desired to escape from the pedantry and exclusiveness of a university training. Quite in contrast with Flaubert, he said with regard to the literary calling: "It may be questioned whether the pursuit of literature—as that mode of life which secures its end by employing energy and occupying leisure agreeable to the individual—renders a man really happy. Literature takes a second place in my estimation, and for this reason, although I have persevered in it for solace and escape from fretting care, I have never been able to regard it very seriously. . . . Literature exists for life, not life for literature." He said elsewhere: "We ought to learn to live outside our own lives for something." His career was a lifelong struggle to realize the ideal. He started with the conscious purpose of doing and being all that he was capable of, to be a positive force, to live unfaltering out in the fierce light of the world.

The picture of perfect self-consciousness might seem a trifle absurd if we did not bear in mind the tacit resolution with which the purpose was carried out, and the really splendid character of the result. Symonds differed from Flaubert in ways that are instructive and interesting. He wrote a vast mass of prose of high quality. He sought to express the

best there was in him in the most vivid form possible. But, more than all, he struggled for what he called "self-effectuation." Literature was secondary. He loved truth, and was himself the most sincere of men. His life was a continual growth.

With utter humility of spirit he sought for what there was of worth in the world as a means. Consciously, he sought not for style, as Flaubert, but for his own highest development and the ultimate truth of things. The story of his life has deep psychological interest; it is, moreover, full of utmost tenderness and pathos. There was a splendid, manly quality in him. If he was not a great, he was certainly a fine and rare spirit. He and Flaubert were men of extraordinary talent, as distinguished from genius, though in Symonds there was always present a deep spiritual longing. The one gave himself to the study and absorption of the deepest truths of life; the other, the worship of the "plastic idea." The one lived a life of strenuous endeavor, both helpful and stimulating; the other wrote a great book, judged as a bit of impressionism, and kept himself aloof from the world. The one represents breadth and health and sanity; the other, the exclusiveness of a purely intellectual view of life.

Symonds had none of the conceits so common to the literary class. He says: "To wear the poet's crown, to win the fame of the scholar, seem to me on par with driving a straight furrow through the cornfield, or steering a ship to port through perilous waters, under stormy skies." He wanted men judged for what they were, and he sought to broaden his sympathies and to fraternize with men of all classes. But his great desire was to attain spiritual peace, a faith that would yield contentment. After long groping, he found it at last, and in his latter days was able to write to a friend: "Out of this calm and chastened mood I want to tell you that my theory of existence is to sustain the spiritual, the energetic, the rejoicing element in self alive as the one great duty to the world, the one function for which a man was framed."

In the case of both Symonds and Flaubert we have a vivid record of the long struggle—the effort of the one to at-

tain perfection of form, the effort of the other to grapple with higher issues and reach self-effectuation. Yet who shall say that it is not a record full of charm and stimulus? They were men exceptionally endowed, but Flaubert concerned himself with the outward husk, the visual, external impression, so dear to the French. He was truly an "observer of the human comedy" which seemed, withal, so to rasp his nerves. He represented the sterilizing dictum of "art for art's sake." He lacked faith, which Symonds calls "the oxygen of life," and hated his fellow-men, and his life ended in more or less bitterness of spirit; while Symonds, who attained to a superb faith in man and the future, grew in his capacity for enjoyment, and expanded with glowing sympathy and belief in the livableness of life. The one represented the intellectual; the other, the human ideal.

JAMES WALTER YOUNG.